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ABSTRACT

Several researchers have explored the role of alcohol in domestic violence and attributions of blame. To compare the amount of blame attributed to an incident of wife abuse, alcoholic (N=52) and nonalcoholic (N=159) subjects read an account of wife abuse and distributed a percentage of the blame to the man, the woman, and the situation. Nonalcoholic subjects attributed less blame to an intoxicated husband than to a sober husband and more blame to an intoxicated wife than to a sober one. Alcoholic subjects increased the amount of blame attributed to the husband and decreased the blame attributed to the wife only when the husband was intoxicated and the wife was sober. Alcoholics attributed more internal responsibility for the abuse than did nonalcoholics. For the nonalcoholics, alcohol intoxication in wife abuse seemed to provide the intoxicated husband with a socially acceptable excuse for his abusive behavior and a reason for beating his intoxicated wife. For the alcoholics, alcohol intoxication increased the amount of personal responsibility attributed to the intoxicated individual for the abuse, particularly when the spouse was sober. The results suggest a need for further research on other forms of abuse, e.g., child abuse, husband abuse, and abuse of the elderly. (Author/NRB)

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Attribution of Blame for Wife Abuse by Alcoholics and Nonalcoholics

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Abstract

The purpose of the present study was to compare the amount of blame attributed by alcoholic and nonalcoholic individuals for an incident of wife abuse. Alcoholic and nonalcoholic subjects read a scenario depicting an incident of wife abuse where the husband and/or the wife may have been using alcohol prior to the act of abuse and distributed a percentage of the blame to each of three factors: the man, the woman, and the situation. Nonalcoholic subjects attributed less blame to the husband when he was intoxicated than when he was sober. The amount of blame attributed to the wife by the nonalcoholics was greater when she was intoxicated than when she was sober. Alcoholic subjects increased the amount of blame attributed to the husband only when he was intoxicated and the wife was sober. In a similar manner, the alcoholics decreased the amount of blame attributed to the wife only when she was sober and the husband was intoxicated. The alcoholics also attributed more personal or internal responsibility for the incident of abuse than did the nonalcoholics. For the nonalcoholics, the role of alcohol intoxication in wife abuse appears to be that it provides the intoxicated husband with a socially acceptable excuse for his abusive behavior (viz., "The alcohol made me do it.") and a reason for beating his intoxicated wife (viz., "The drunken woman had it coming to her."). For the alcoholics, the effect of alcohol intoxication was to increase the amount of personal responsibility attributed to the intoxicated individual for the incident of abuse, particularly when the spouse was sober.

Attribution of Blame for Wife Abuse by Alcoholics and Nonalcoholics

What is the role of alcohol in domestic violence? Sobell and Sobell (1973) have suggested that alcohol provides a socially acceptable excuse for engaging in otherwise inappropriate behavior with a minimum of social disapproval. The role of alcohol in domestic violence may be to provide an appropriate excuse (e.g., alcohol made me do it) for engaging in abusive behavior. Thus the effect of alcohol would be to attribute less blame to the individual for his/her abusive behavior. However, this assumes that it is acceptable for the individual to be intoxicated. For example, attitudes toward female intoxication are less favorable than those towards male intoxication (Gomberg, 1976). This situation leads to the possibility of a drunken male being more likely to be excused for inappropriate behavior than a drunk female. Support for this contention has been provided by Richardson and Campbell (1980). Using college students as subjects, Richardson and Campbell reported that the amount of personal blame attributed to a husband in an incident of wife abuse was reduced when he was drunk. However, the amount of blame attributed to the wife increased when she was drunk.

While the research of Richardson and Campbell does suggest that the effect of alcohol is to reduce a man's responsibility and increase a woman's responsibility, the question still remains as to whether this relationship is similar for individuals who use or have used alcohol extensively (e.g., alcoholics). The purpose of the present study was to compare the amount of blame attributed by alcoholic and nonalcoholic individuals for an incident

of wife abuse when the husband and/or the wife may have been using alcohol prior to the incident. It was predicted that the alcoholic individuals would attribute more personal or internal responsibility to the individuals involved in the incident of wife abuse than the nonalcoholic individuals, who were expected to attribute a greater amount of blame to the external situation. This prediction is based on previous research indicating that alcoholics demonstrate a high degree of internal responsibility for their own actions (cf. Phares, 1976).

Method

Design and Subjects

The design was a 2 x 2 x 2 x 3 factorial with between-subject variables of type of subject (alcoholic vs. nonalcoholic), woman's intoxication (drunk vs. sober), and man's intoxication (drunk vs. sober). Category of blame (man vs. woman vs. situation) was a within-subjects variable.

The nonalcoholic subjects were 56 male and 103 female undergraduate students enrolled in introductory psychology courses who volunteered for an experiment entitled "Social Perception" in return for receiving points to be applied to their final grade. The data were collected during a class session reserved for research participation.

The alcoholic subjects were 35 male and 17 female individuals participating in an alcoholic treatment program. The data were collected in group sessions prior to the treatment meetings. All the alcoholic subjects were asked if they would be willing to volunteer for an experiment entitled "Social Perception."

Procedure

Upon beginning the experimental session, the subjects were greeted by a female experimenter. All of the subjects were told that the study was concerned with investigating the perceptions of social events. The subjects were told that all that would be expected of them would be to read a brief description of an event and answer some questions. After being given a summary of the procedures to be used in the study, the subjects were asked to sign an informed consent statement indicating that their participation was completely voluntary. After the consent forms were collected, the subjects were then presented with a brief scenario depicting an incident of wife abuse.

After reading the scenario and answering the questions, the purpose of the study was explained and all questions were answered.

Manipulation of the spouses' intoxication variables. The scenarios depicted a verbal disagreement between "Mr. and Mrs. Hilton." The scenarios described Mr. Hilton as being irritated with his wife for giving a bridge party and not preparing a proper dinner for him. Mrs. Hilton retaliated by accusing her husband of not making enough money to provide them with decent food. The argument escalated to the point of cursing and name-calling. Mr. Hilton struck his wife several times, leaving her with a black eye and a number of visible bruises.

Within the description of the scenario, the intoxication of the man and woman was systematically varied. The drunkenness manipulation was accomplished by single-word substitutions inserted throughout the scenario (e.g., "wine" for "coffee"; "slurred" for "said"). A statement by the spouse calling attention to the drunkenness was also inserted in the intoxi-

cation condition; this statement was omitted in the sober condition.

Dependent measure. After reading the scenario, the subjects were asked to distribute a percentage of the blame to each of three factors (man, woman, and situation). The percentage of blame attributed to the three different categories served as the dependent variable in the present study.

Results

The distribution of blame results were analyzed with a 2 (type of subject) x 2 (woman's intoxication) x 2 (man's intoxication) x 3 (category of blame) analysis of variance. with repeated measures on the last variable.

This overall analysis of variance indicated a significant main effect of the category of blame variable, F (2, 406) = 168.44, $p < .001$. Participants assigned the majority of blame for the incident of abuse to the man (52.01%), while the woman and the situation received 29.0% and 14.28%, respectively. This analysis also yielded several significant (all p's < .05) two- and three-way interactions. However, an interpretation of these two- and three-way interactions would have to be made with caution due to the presence of a significant type of subject x woman's intoxication x man's intoxication x category of blame four-way interaction, F (2, 406) = 3.77, $p < .02$. Cell means for this interaction are given in Figures 1, 2, and 3. Subsequent analyses of these means were performed using simple-effect procedures.

Insert Figure 1 about here

Blame attributed to the man.

Cell means for the amount of blame attributed to the husband by alcoholic and nonalcoholic subjects are presented in Figure 1. For the nonalcoholics, when the husband was drunk, he received less blame when the wife was drunk than when she was sober (42.98% vs. 53.39%, $p < .001$). This relationship was also found to be the case when the husband was sober (48.18%, vs. 58.88%, $p < .001$). For the alcoholics, when the husband was drunk, he received considerably more blame when the wife was sober than when she was drunk (71.54% vs. 50.55%, $p < .001$). However, when the husband was sober, the alcoholic subjects attributed slightly less blame to the husband when the wife was sober than when she was drunk (48.67% vs. 51.33%, $p < .1$).

Alcoholic vs. nonalcoholic subjects. The alcoholic subjects attributed more blame to the husband when he was drunk than did the nonalcoholics. This relationship was found to be the case when the wife was drunk (50.55% vs. 42.98%, $p < .001$) and when she was sober (71.54% vs. 53.39%, $p < .001$). The alcoholics also attributed more blame to the husband than did the nonalcoholics when the husband was sober and the wife was drunk (51.33% vs. 48.18%, $p < .05$). However, when both the wife and the husband were sober, the alcoholics attributed less blame to the husband than did the nonalcoholics (48.67% vs. 58.88%, $p < .001$).

Insert Figure 2 about here

Blame attributed to the woman

Cell means for the amount of blame attributed to the wife by alcoholic and nonalcoholic subjects are presented in Figure 2. The nonalcoholics attributed more blame for the incident of wife abuse to the wife when she was drunk than when she was sober. This relationship was found to be the case when the husband was drunk (31.10% vs. 24.05%, $p < .001$) and when the husband was sober (29.63% vs. 2[illegible]22%, $p < .01$). For the alcoholics, when the husband was drunk, the wife received considerably less blame when she was sober than when she was drunk (13.46% vs. 38.33%, $p < .001$). When the husband was sober, the alcoholic subjects attributed slightly more blame to the wife when she was sober than when she was drunk (42.67% vs. 40.00%, $p < .1$).

Alcoholic vs. nonalcoholic subjects. The alcoholics attributed more blame to the wife when both the husband and wife were drunk than did the nonalcoholics (38.33% vs. 31.11%, $p < .001$). When the wife was sober, the alcoholics attributed less blame to her when her husband was drunk than did the nonalcoholics (13.46% vs. 24.05%, $p < .001$). The alcoholics attributed more blame to the wife when her husband was sober than did the nonalcoholics. This relationship was found to be the case when the wife was drunk (40.00% vs. 29.63%, $p < .001$) and when she was sober (42.67% vs. 25.22%, $p < .001$).

Insert Figure 3 about here

Blame attributed to the situation

Cell means for the amount of blame attributed to the situation category by alcoholic and nonalcoholic subjects are presented in Figure 3. The amount of blame attributed to the situation category by the nonalcoholics when the husband was sober was greater when the wife was drunk than when she was sober (17.20% vs. 12.12%, $p < .001$). Although not a significant increase, when the husband was drunk, the amount of blame attributed to the situation by the nonalcoholics was also greater when the wife was drunk than when she was sober (20.30% vs. 17.89%, ns). For the alcoholic subjects, when the husband was drunk, the amount of blame attributed to the situation was greater when the wife was drunk than when she was sober (10.56% vs. 5.77%, $p < .005$). When the husband was sober, the alcoholic subjects attributed a similar amount of blame to the situation when the wife was sober and when she was drunk (5.66% vs. 5.33, ns).

Alcoholic vs. nonalcoholic subjects. The nonalcoholics attributed more blame to the situation category when the husband was drunk than did the alcoholic subjects. This relationship was found to be the case when the wife was drunk (20.30% vs. 10.56%, $p < .001$) and when she was sober (17.89% vs. 5.77%, $p < .001$). The results also indicated that the nonalcoholics attributed more blame to the situation category than did the alcoholics when the husband was sober and the wife was drunk (17.20% vs. 5.33%, $p < .001$) and when they were both sober (12.12% vs. 5.66%, $p < .001$).

Discussion

The purpose of the present study was to assess the effects of husband and wife intoxication on alcoholics' and nonalcoholics' attribution of blame for an incident of wife abuse. Since alcoholics generally demonstrate a high degree of internal control in accepting responsibility for their own actions, it was predicted that alcoholic subjects would attribute more blame to the individual than to situational factors for an incident of wife abuse. More specifically, the alcoholic subjects were expected to attribute a majority of the blame to internal or personal factors, such as the husband being responsible for his abusive actions even when he was intoxicated. On the other hand, nonalcoholic subjects were expected to attribute more blame to external or situational factors, such as the husband being drunk or the wife being drunk, than to internal or personal factors.

The results of the present study supported the major predictions for the nonalcoholic subjects. Nonalcoholic subjects attributed less blame to the husband when he was intoxicated than when he was sober. The amount of blame attributed to the wife by the nonalcoholics was greater when she was intoxicated than when she was sober. Thus, for the nonalcoholics, the role of alcohol intoxication in wife abuse appears to be that it provides the intoxicated husband with a socially acceptable excuse for his abusive behavior (viz., "The alcohol made me do it.") and a reason for beating his intoxicated wife (viz., "The drunken woman had it coming to her.").

As predicted, the alcoholics attributed more personal or internal responsibility for the incident of wife abuse than did nonalcoholics. Thus, the effect of alcohol intoxication was to increase the amount of

personal responsibility alcoholics attributed to the intoxicated individual for the incident of abuse, particularly when the spouse was sober.

The present study was an initial attempt to compare the attributions made by alcoholic and nonalcoholic individuals for an incident of wife abuse. Future research in this area should assess the extent to which these results are generalized to other forms of abuse, such as child abuse, husband abuse, abuse of the elderly, and sexual abuse (e.g., rape). In addition, the attribution of blame by abusers and nonabusers for an incident of spouse or child abuse should also be investigated in the future.

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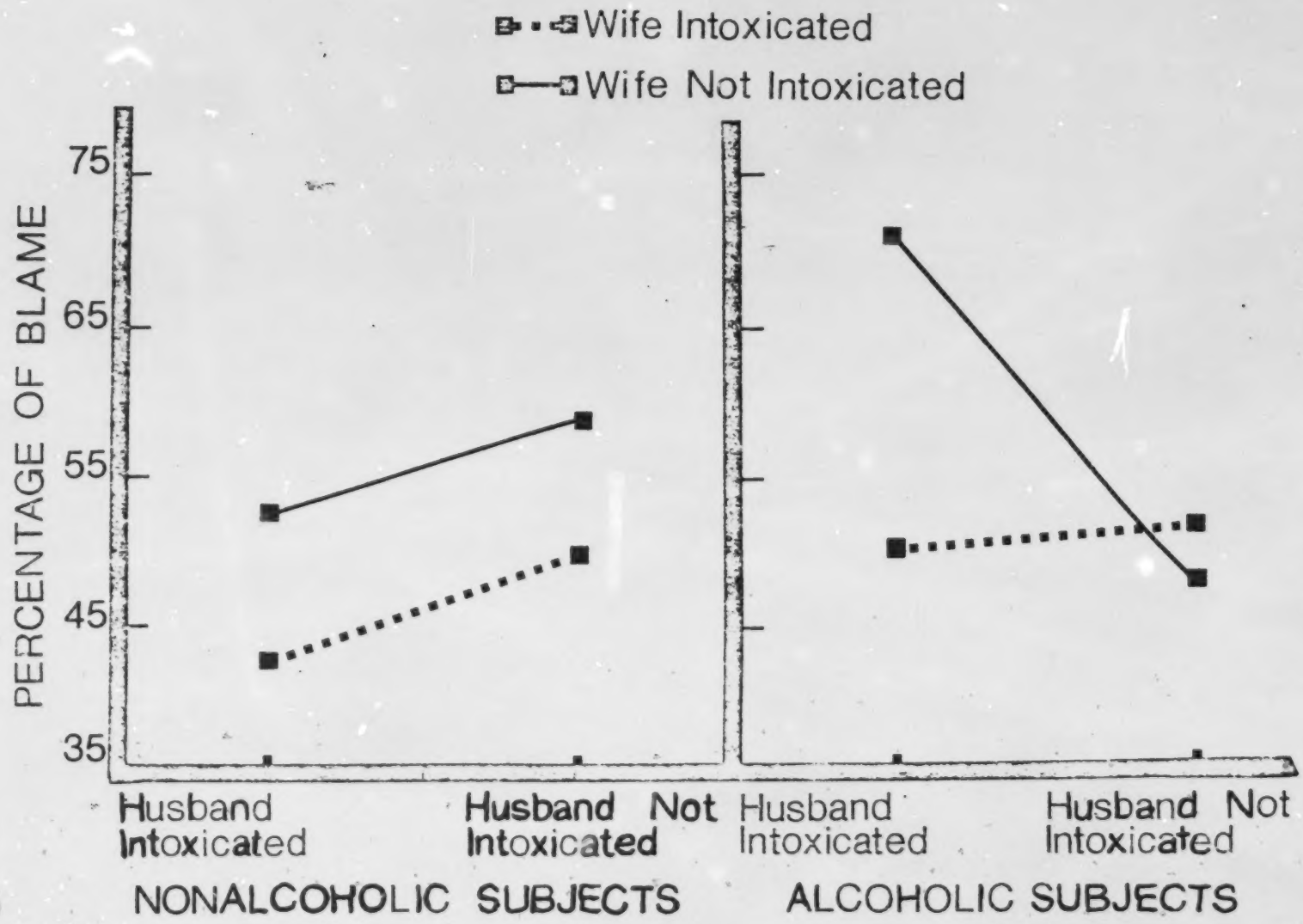
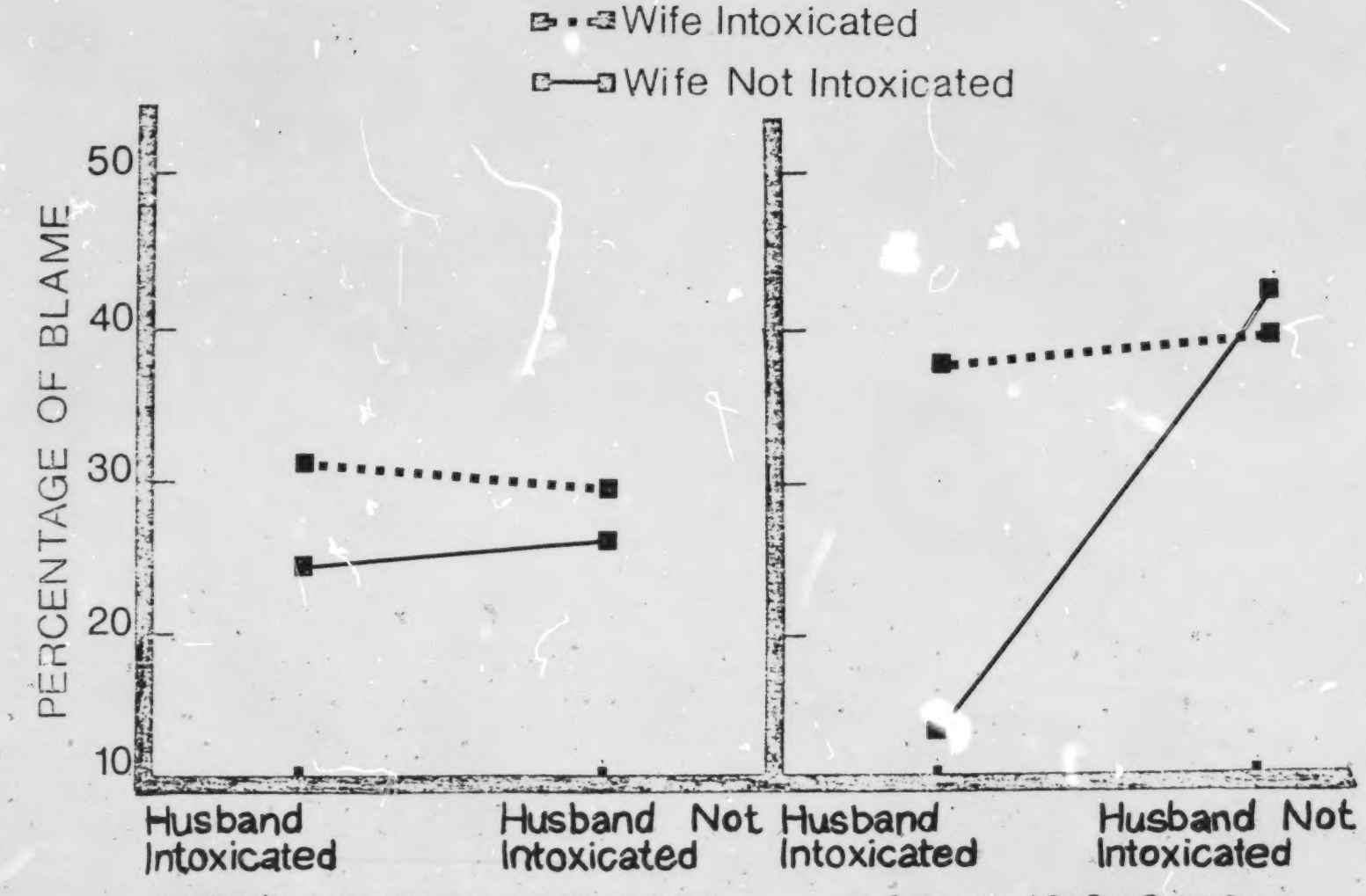
Figure Captions

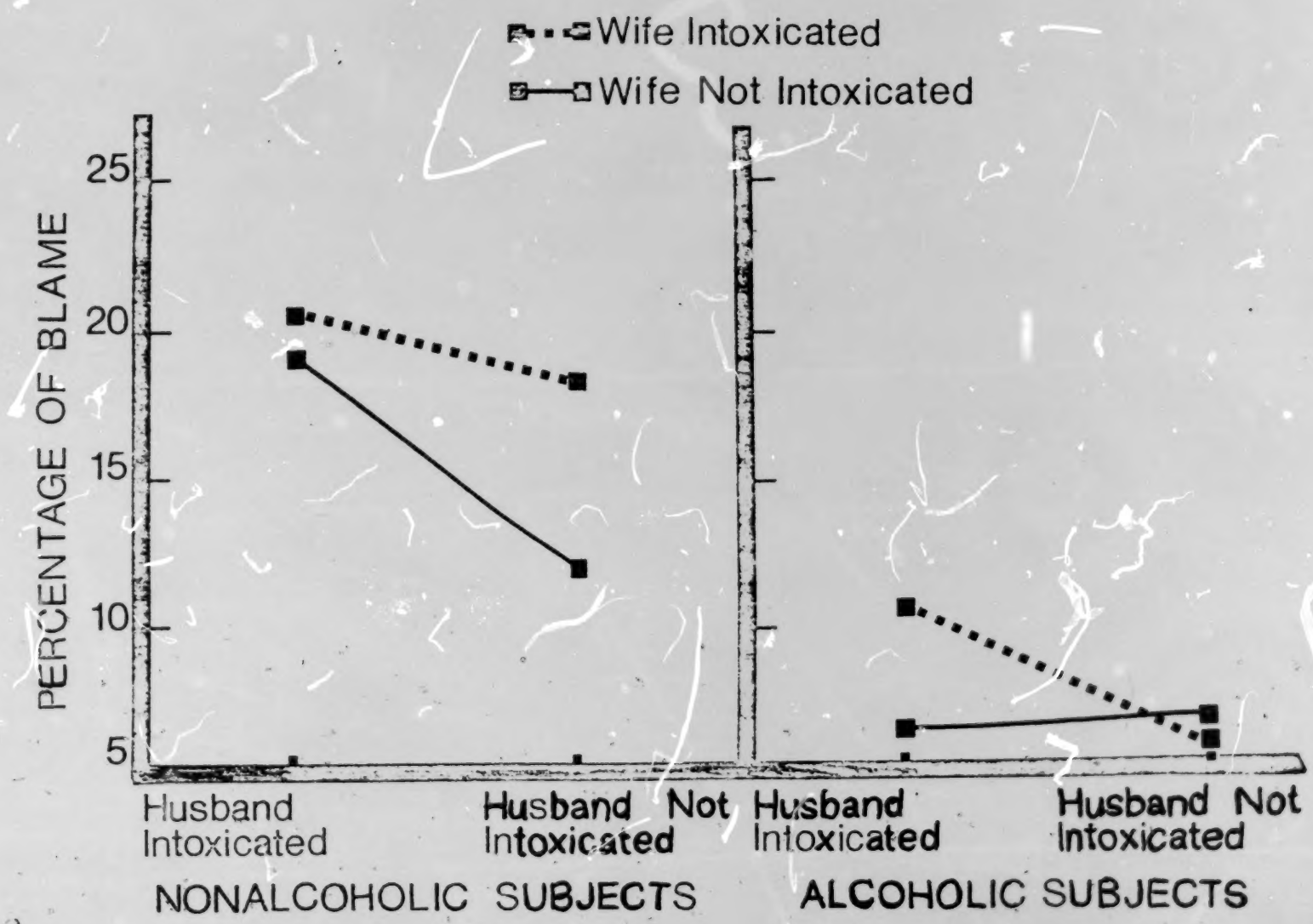
Figure 1. Mean percentage of blame attributed to the husband by alcoholic and nonalcoholic subjects as a function of the intoxication of the husband and the intoxication of the wife.

Figure 2. Mean percentage of blame attributed to the wife by alcoholic and nonalcoholic subjects as a function of the intoxication of the husband and the intoxication of the wife.

Figure 3. Mean percentage of blame attributed to the situation category by alcoholic and nonalcoholic subjects as a function of the intoxication of the husband and the intoxication of the wife.


Wife Intoxicated
Wife Not Intoxicated
PERCENTAGE OF BLAME
75
65
55
45
35
Husband Intoxicated
Husband Not Intoxicated
Husband Intoxicated
Husband Not Intoxicated
NONALCOHOLIC SUBJECTS
ALCOHOLIC SUBJECTS


Wife Intoxicated
Wife Not Intoxicated
PERCENTAGE OF BLAME
50
40
30
20
10
Husband Intoxicated
Husband Not Intoxicated
Husband Intoxicated
Husband Not Intoxicated
NONALCOHOLIC SUBJECTS
ALCOHOLIC SUBJECTS


Wife Intoxicated
Wife Not Intoxicated
PERCENTAGE OF BLAME
25
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5
Husband Intoxicated
Husband Not Intoxicated
Husband Intoxicated
Husband Not Intoxicated
NONALCOHOLIC SUBJECTS
ALCOHOLIC SUBJECTS